

# Does Fear of Crime contribute to Anti-Immigrant Sentiments? An analysis of police records and survey data in Belgian communities.

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# Does Fear of Crime contribute to Anti-Immigrant Sentiments?

## An analysis of police records and survey data in Belgian communities.

### **Abstract**

It is routinely assumed that the presence of ethnic minorities in a local community contributes to a feeling of unsafety among the majority population. This could be explained by a direct relation between ethnic diversity and some forms of crime, but it can also be expected that stereotypes toward specific groups of the population contribute to this relation. In this article it is assessed whether fear of crime is positively related to anti-immigrant sentiments, and to what extent they are associated with the real and perceived presence of ethnic minority groups and the occurrence of criminal acts. The analysis is based on the combination of official police records and survey data for local municipalities in Belgium. The results show there is no significant relation between reported crime and fear of crime. Both actual and perceived levels of ethnic diversity, however, were strongly and significantly related to fear of crime. The findings suggest that applications of the threat theory should not only focus on economic and cultural threat, but also on the perceived impact of diversity on crime and safety.

**Keywords:** Crime, fear of crime, ethnic threat, community, Belgium, police records

## Literature

Both in popular discourse and in political rhetoric, the presence of ethnic minorities and immigrant groups is often framed in terms of crime and fear of crime (Bianchi, Buonanno & Pinotti, 2012; Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997). The majority population of a society shows a tendency to associate members of ethnic minorities with specific forms of mostly violent crime, and anti-immigrant rhetoric in quite some cases focuses on the threat of crime that is associated with the presence of ethnic minorities (Chiricos, Hogan & Hertz, 1997; Jackman & Volpert, 1996). From a theoretical perspective, this is a very interesting association, since at least three different possible causal mechanisms can be distinguished. First, it is well-known that specific ethnic groups tend to specialize in specific forms of crime (Hawkins, 2011; Ousey & Kubrin, 2009). A plausible relation therefore could be that ethnic minorities tend to specialize in those forms of crime that have a stronger impact on fear of crime than forms of crime that are apparently being practiced more frequently by members of the majority group. Violent crime, street and drug-related crimes are obvious culprits in this regard, while on the other hand various forms of white-collar crime that might be practiced more often by majority group members seem less strongly related to fear of crime and threat among the population (Gordon, 1990). A second plausible mechanism is based on the assumption that those who have high levels of ethnic prejudice are more likely to associate visible minorities with crime and threat, even disregarding the evidence that is being offered by objective figures with regard to crime prevalence and victimization. In that case, fear of crime could be considered as a precursor for anti-immigrant sentiments (Barkan & Cohn, 2005). Finally, a third possible causal mechanism is that members of the majority group are more likely to see crime as disturbing and threatening if it is being committed by a member of a visible minority group (Sweeney & Haney, 1992). The assumption here is that the same act is experienced as more threatening when it is being practiced by a member of a visible minority than when the same act is being practiced by a member of the majority group. Self-evidently, we should also pay attention to the possibility that these three mechanisms occur simultaneously and might even reinforce one another. Both from a scientific as from a social point of view, however, it is highly relevant to determine how exactly we can explain a relation between ethnic diversity and fear of crime.

In this article, we mainly pay attention to the first and the second possible mechanism. We do not have any information on the perpetrators of criminal acts, as police records do not contain information on the ethnic origin of all perpetrators. The only thing we can do is to rely on

spatial data that allow us to ascertain whether, at the aggregate level, there is at least a correlation between the presence of ethnic minorities and the occurrence of specific criminal acts (Sampson, 2008; Hooghe et al., 2011). By taking into account both the actual level of crime and the presence of ethnic minorities in local communities, we can ascertain how fear of crime helps us to explain the occurrence of anti-immigrant sentiments. This relation will be investigated using the results of a representative population survey in the northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium, where police records on crime and population records on the presence of ethnic minorities can be related to the attitudes expressed in the survey. It is important to note that we can rely on police data about registered crime, that can be located at the level of the community.

In the remainder of this article, we first review the literature on the relation between fear of crime and anti-immigrant sentiments, before we present data and methods. We close with some observations on why fear of crime contributes to the occurrence of anti-immigrant sentiments.

### **Diversity, threat and feelings of unsafety**

(...)

H1. The prevalence of crime in the community is positively related to fear of crime and anti-immigrant sentiments.

(...)

H2. The (perceived) presence of ethnic minorities is positively related to fear of crime and anti-immigrant sentiments.

(...)

H3. The relation between ethnic diversity and fear of crime is stronger among social groups that are more likely to become victims of violent crime, i.e. women and the elderly.

These three hypotheses will guide us through the analysis, which is based on police records and survey data in Belgium.

(...)

## **Data and Methods**

First, to measure our variables at the individual level, including anti-immigrant sentiments, fear of crime and perceived ethnic diversity, we use the Social Cohesion Indicators in Flanders (SCIF) survey. This survey was conducted in 2009 among a representative sample of the adult population of the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. The survey consisted of 2,085 face-to-face interviews, and the response rate of the survey was 54 %, resulting in a reliable and representative sample of the population of that region (Hooghe, Vanhoutte and Bircan 2009). Considering the nature of our research questions, only the Belgian-born respondents were included in the analysis (n= 1,910). Self-evidently, it is theoretically just as relevant to investigate fear of crime and prejudice among ethnic minorities, but given the distribution of the sample, no reliable analyses can be conducted using the results of this subgroup. Therefore it is a safer strategy to concentrate only on those respondents that were born in Belgium themselves (van Craen, 2013). We have deleted cases with missing values listwise. All in all, the sample in the analysis therefore includes 1,825 respondents. These respondents are concentrated in 40 randomly selected Flemish municipalities, rendering this dataset ideally suited to conduct multilevel analysis.

The macro level data available for the smallest geographic unit in Belgium are situated at the municipal level. The Flemish region of Belgium is divided in 308 municipalities with a rather large degree of autonomy (Wauters, Verlet & Ackaert, 2012). The region has a population of 6,250,000, and the average population size of a municipality is 20,300 which is sufficiently small to provide a sense of community for most inhabitants. Both the real-life data on ethnic diversity as well as the real-life data on incidence of crime were collected at the municipal level. Regarding the level of ethnic diversity in municipalities, statistical data was obtained from the Belgian National Institute of Statistics, that keeps the official population records. The data on the incidence of registered criminal acts was provided by the Belgian Federal Police, and it includes the registration of both the federal police and the local police forces.

(...)

## **(Results)**

### **Discussion**

In this article, we investigated the prevalence and determinants of fear of crime in Belgian communities, capitalizing on the availability of crime records that have been collected and registered in a uniform manner by the Belgian federal police. A first, sobering, conclusion is that we do not find any significant relation between the actual occurrence of criminal acts and fear of crime. To put it bluntly: apparently these two elements are not related. This non-finding obviously is open to a number of interpretations. A counter-argument might be that the Belgian federal police does not offer a reliable data source with regard to criminal offenses. It should be remembered however that since the 1998 police reform in Belgium, the federal police has made a strong effort to set up a reliable policy on crime statistics and there is no apparent reason why there should be any regional variation in the reliability of these statistics. Furthermore, it has to be realized that the police statistics depend on the willingness of victims to report crime. In urbanized areas, victims might be less willing to report a crime than in rural areas. While this is plausible, it has to be kept in mind that the police statistics are actually in line with what one could expect about the prevalence of violent crime. While in the urban center of Antwerp (almost 500,000 inhabitants) the violent crime rate was 29.72 acts/1000 inhabitants, in the rural municipality of Hoeilaart (10,000 inhabitants) this was 8.32 acts/1000 inhabitants. So despite the fact that residents in rural areas might be more willing to report crime than in urban centers, there is still an obvious urban/rural division. Nevertheless, we do not find any relation between crime levels and fear of crime. A possible explanation for this phenomenon might be that city-dwellers more or less take a background level of crime and disorder for granted, so this does not have a strong effect on their feeling of safety. For residents of rural communities, on the other hand, even a low number of criminal acts might be perceived as challenging their daily routines within their community.

The main finding of the current study therefore is that, despite all the strong control variables that have been included, the actual and perceived ethnic diversity of the municipality are the main determinants of fear of crime. Even more strongly: the actual and perceived presence of

ethnic minorities determine fear of crime, even controlling for actual levels of crime. Therefore, the conclusion must be that the key mechanism that can be identified in the relation between ethnic diversity, fear of crime and anti-immigrant sentiments is ethnic prejudice. First of all, this means that the conclusions of previous studies on the relation between ethnic diversity and fear of crime that have been conducted in the United States apparently are also valid in the Western European context. While the US studies thus far were predominantly based on the feeling of threat experienced by White Americans as a result of the presence of Afro-Americans, it is theoretically relevant to observe that apparently exactly the same mechanism is present in Western Europe, despite the fact that the characteristics of visible minorities are totally different in this context. This would suggest that the prejudice-threat mechanism that we have observed is not dependent on specific characteristics of the minority population. It would be highly relevant, therefore, to ascertain whether this mechanism is also present in other cultural contexts.

A final observation is that the impact of perceived ethnic diversity is especially great, as it is related directly to both fear of crime and anti-immigrant sentiments. Previous empirical tests of the realistic group threat theory have focused mainly on economic competition and on elements of cultural dominance. Our findings, however, would suggest that another causal mechanism is equally plausible: the mere perceived presence of ethnic minorities already is associated with fear of crime and negative intergroup attitudes. Simultaneously, we know that these feelings have direct behavioral effects, as e.g. residents of these neighborhoods will avoid to have social or cultural activities outside during the evening. Some groups that are able to do so, might even consider moving out of the community altogether, thus contributing to a process of geographical segregation and concentration. Some studies have suggested that perceived increases in ethnic diversity might lead to lower levels of social activity and civic engagement (Putnam, 2007). These assumptions routinely focus on what might be called the usual suspects in the threat literature, that are based on economic and cultural or religious threat. The perceived criminal threat, however, might be equally important, especially with regard to geographical segregation. If members of the native majority group feel more unsafe because of the presence of minority groups, even controlling for actual crime levels, inevitably this will also have behavioral consequences. People who feel unsafe will also cut down on their public activities and their level of social interaction. If one feels economically or culturally threatened by the presence of ethnic minorities, there is not much point in moving, e.g., from a diverse urban neighborhood to a less diverse suburb. The competition on the labor market does not become less intense if one moves ten kilometers outside a city

center. But with regard to fear of crime and feeling unsafe, moving toward the suburbs of course does make sense, and this feeling might function as an incentive for White affluent families to move to the suburbs. Most of the research on group conflict theory thus far has dealt with issues like unemployment, job scarcity and the housing market. The current research, however, suggests that fear of crime might be equally important if we want to explain the occurrence of anti-immigrant sentiments among the majority population, and their behavioral consequences with regard to spatial segregation.



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